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Writing Sample

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Includes "We Lived Happily During the War," "Author's Prayer," "Dancing in Odessa," "Maestro," "Traveling Musicians" and "Praise."

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We Lived Happily During the War

And when they bombed other people's houses, we

protested

but not enough, we opposed them but not

enough. I was

in my bed, around my bed America

was falling: invisible house by invisible house by invisible house.

I took a chair outside and watched the sun.

In the sixth month

of a disastrous reign in the house of money

in the street of money in the city of money in the country of money,
our great country of money, we (forgive us)

lived happily during the war.

-- Ilya Kaminsky

Author's Prayer

If I speak for the dead, I must leave
this animal of my body,

I must write the same poem over and over,
for an empty page is the white flag of their surrender.

If I speak for them, I must walk on the edge
of myself, I must live as a blind man

who runs through rooms without
touching the furniture.

Yes, I live. I can cross the streets asking "What year is it?"
I can dance in my sleep and laugh

in front of the mirror.
Even sleep is a prayer, Lord,

I will praise your madness, and
in a language not mine, speak

of music that wakes us, music
in which we move. For whatever I say

is a kind of petition, and the darkest
days must I praise.

Dancing In Odessa

In a city ruled jointly by doves and crows, doves covered the main district, and crows the market. A deaf boy counted how many birds there were in his neighbor's backyard, producing a four-digit number. He dialed the number and confessed his love to the voice on the line.

My secret: at the age of four I became deaf. When I lost my hearing, I began to see voices. On a crowded trolley, a one-armed man said that my life would be mysteriously linked to the history of my country. Yet my country cannot be found, its citizens meet in a dream to conduct elections. He did not describe their faces, only a few names: Roland, Aladdin, Sinbad.

Maestro

What is memory? what makes a body glow:
an apple orchard in Moldova and the school is bombed—

when the schools are bombed, sadness is forbidden
—I write this now and I feel my body's weight:

the screaming girls, 347 voices
in the story of a doctor saving them, his hands

trapped under a wall, his granddaughter dying nearby—
she whispers *I don't want to die, I have eaten such apples.*

He touches her mouth as a blind man reading lips
and yells *Shut up! I am near the window, I*

am asking for help! speaking,
he cannot stop speaking, in the dark:

of Brahms, Chopin he speaks to them to calm them.
A doctor, yes, whatever window

framed his life, outside: tomatoes grew, clouds passed and we
once lived. A doctor with a tattoo of a parrot on his trapped arm,

seeing his granddaughter's cheekbones
no longer her cheekbones, with surgical precision

stitches suffering and grace:
two days pass, he shouts

Dancing in Odessa

We lived north of the future, days opened
letters with a child's signature, a raspberry, a page of sky.

My grandmother threw tomatoes
from her balcony, she pulled imagination like a blanket
over my head. I painted
my mother's face. She understood
loneliness, hid the dead in the earth like partisans.

The night undressed us (I counted
its pulse) my mother danced, she filled the past
with peaches, casseroles. At this, my doctor laughed, his granddaughter
touched my eyelid—I kissed

the back of her knee. The city trembled,
a ghost-ship setting sail.

And my classmate invented twenty names for Jew.

He was an angel, he had no name,
we wrestled, yes. My grandfathers fought

the German tanks on tractors, I kept a suitcase full
of Brodsky's poems. The city trembled,
a ghost-ship setting sail.

At night, I woke to whisper: yes, we lived.

We lived, yes, don't say it was a dream.

At the local factory, my father
took a handful of snow, put it in my mouth.
The sun began a routine narration,
whitening their bodies: mother, father dancing, moving
as the darkness spoke behind them.
It was April. The sun washed the balconies, April.

I retell the story the light etches
into my hand: *Little book, go to the city without me.*

Traveling Musicians

In the beginning was the sea—we heard the surf in our breathing, certain that we carried seawater in our veins.

A city famous for its drunk tailors, huge mausoleums of rabbis, horse owners and horse thieves, and most of all, for its stuffed and baked fish. In Odessa, language always involved gestures—it was impossible to ask someone for directions if their hands were busy. I did ask once: a man was holding two huge watermelons, one in each arm. But as I asked more questions, his face grew red and ah! one watermelon fell on the ground as he attempted to gesticulate through the conversation. He was not disappointed, a man of fifty staring at the juicy watermelon meat right there on the sidewalk. He laughed like the most serious child I ever knew, telling me the story about the country where everyone was deaf.

Praise

We were leaving Odessa in such a hurry that we forgot the suitcase filled with English dictionaries outside our apartment building. I came to America without a dictionary, but a few words did remain:

Forgetting: an animal of light. A small ship catches a wind and sails.

Past: figures coming to the water's edge, carrying lamps. Water is suspiciously cold. Many are standing on the shore, the youngest throwing hats in the air.

Sanity: a barrier separating me from madness is not a barrier, really. A huge aquarium filled with water weeds, turtles, and golden fish. I see flashes: movements, names inscribed on the foreheads.

A swift laugh: she leaned over, intrigued. I drank too fast.

Dead: entering our dreams, the dead become inanimate objects: branches, teacups, door-handles. I wake and wish I could carry this clarity with me.

Time, my twin, take me by the hand
through the streets of your city;
my days, your pigeons, are fighting for crumbs—



A woman asks at night for a story with a happy ending.
I have none. A refugee,

I go home and become a ghost
searching the houses I lived in. They say—

*the father of my father of his father of his father was a prince
who married a Jewish girl*

*against the Church's will and his father's will and
the father of his father.* Losing all,

eager to lose: the estate, ships,
hiding this ring (his wedding ring), a ring

my father handed to my brother, then took. Handed,
then took, hastily. In a family album

we sit like the mannequins
of school children

whose destruction,
like a lecture is postponed.

Then my mother begins to dance, re-arranging
this dream. Her love

is difficult; loving her is simple as putting raspberries
in my mouth.

On my brother's head: not a single
gray hair, he is singing to his twelve-month-old son.

And my father is singing
to his six-year-old silence.

This is how we live on earth, a flock of sparrows.
The darkness, a magician, finds quarters

behind our ears. We don't know what life is,
who makes it, the reality is thick

with longing. We put it up to our lips
and drink.



I believe in childhood, a native land of math exams
that return and do not return, I see—

the shore, the trees, a boy
running across the streets like a lost god;
the light falls, touching his shoulder.

Where memory, an old flautist,
plays in the rain and his dog sleeps, its tongue

half hanging out;
for twenty years between life and death

I have run through silence: *in 1993 I came to America.*



America! I put the word on a page, it is my keyhole.
I watch the streets, the shops, the bicyclist, the oleanders.

I open the windows of an apartment
and say: I had masters once, they roared above me,

Who are we? Why are we here?
A lantern they carried still glitters in my sleep,

*—in this dream: my father breathes
as if lighting a lamp over and over. The memory*

*is starting its old engine, it begins to move
and I think the trees are moving.*

On the page's soiled corners
my teacher walks, composing a voice;

he rubs each word in his palms:
"hands learn from the soil and broken glass,

you cannot think a poem," he says,
"watch the light hardening into words."



I was born in the city named after Odysseus
and I praise no nation—

to the rhythm of snow
an immigrant's clumsy phrases fall into speech.

But you asked
for a story with a happy ending. Your loneliness

played its lyre. I sat
on the floor, watching your lips.

Love, a one-legged bird
I bought for forty cents as a child, and released,

is coming back, my soul in reckless feathers.
O the language of birds

with no word for complaint!—
the balconies, the wind.

This is how, while darkness
drew my profile with its little finger,

I have learned to see past as Montale saw it,
the obscurer thoughts of God descending

among a child's drum beats,
over you, over me, over the lemon trees.